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BEA MANLEY SPEAKING

Beatrice Manley will perform the Molly Bloom soliloquy from James Joyce's Ulysses on Monday, May 15, 1978 at 7:30 p.m. in U.S.C.'s Green Room. The performance represents one of a total of four one-woman shows Ms. Manley has presented over the past eight years, one for which she has been highly praised as both actress and editor.

Prior to her solo performances, Beatrice Manley was known for her roles as Hedda Gabler, Winnie in Happy Days, and Mother Courage. Her film credits include Bang the Drum Slowly, as well as Night Terror, The Baby, and Five Desperate Woman. She served as Artist-in-Residence at Stanford University, and was one of the founders of the Actors Workshop of San Francisco. Currently, she is a visiting professor at the University of Southern California.

After having been accustomed to playing greater or lesser roles as a member of a company, she suddenly found herself "without a theatre, and without roots anywhere." That was in 1971. "I was between cities," she said, "and I was between careers. My daughter, Tara, sent me a copy of the Yeats Crazy Jane poems, which she had been studying at Cornell. She said 'Mama, you are like Crazy Jane. Crazy Jane has this trauma, and then she has a vision, and everything comes out alright.'"

She had intended to perform the poems for her daughter. This was not a new idea, for years before, at other times when she had found herself without a theatre, she had positioned herself before the wall in her Third Avenue apartment in New York, and acted for a friend. "I did Baudelaire and T. S. Eliot for my friend Charles. I worked on them by myself, and that was my performance. That's what you do when you're reduced to one. And I've often thought, what if one then doesn't have the one? But that's Beckett already, well?" She laughs, punctuating with a wave of the hand.

INTERVIEWER: HOW DID YOU COME TO DO SOLILOQUY WORK ONSTAGE?
BEA: As I said, I planned to do the Crazy Jane poems for my daughter. I thought I would record them. I worked with Josephine Harris on them one summer. It was glorious. She gave

me her views about the poems, and started me thinking about them. I took off from there. I soon found that the poems were, for me, a very good way of experiencing another mode of acting. I had worked naturalistically for the most part, up until that point. I used those poems as a way of dealing with more abstract imagery, and to see whether I could work metaphorically, which is a way I had never worked before.

So the poem soon became, for me, an interesting problem to solve, and I soon forgot my darling daughter. I found another piece that goes beautifully with Crazy Jane. It was a piece written by Rosette Lamont, a woman in New York, and it was the very words of Celeste, Marcel Proust's housekeeper. The two went so remarkably well together that it was, I suppose, my very vagueway of beginning to think for myself. An actor frequently takes orders and does what the director or author says. But in this case it was I, somewhat out of necessity, stepping beyond myself as an actress: remembering a piece and intuiting that this piece would go well with that piece, bringing the two together, and finding it worked beautifully. One was done very, very simply. Celeste just speaks, sits down in a chair and speaks about Marcel Proust. There I use no movement at all. Her words are very poignant: if I just keep out of the way, her piece is poignant. In the Crazy Jane, I allow myself more behavior, you might say. These two works became one piece. It was taking things into my own hands and creating an audience for myself. At one point, suddenly one knew it had to become public. It grew, really, from being performed in front of three or four kids who happened to be in class one day when I was ready to try it out; to a dinner party for six where I performed it more formally; to the home of Anne and Buzz Price, who are very great patrons of the art; then to a performance for about two hundred people at Cal Arts. From there, people who have seen me do it surprisingly come and ask me to do it again, atthe Jung Institute, or at the Yeats Theatre Festival, from which I just returned in March, and so on. That's how the first one started: it was all very natural; I didn't set about doing it.

INTERVIEWER: DOES A SOLILOQUY EVOLVE DIFFERENTLY THAN DO OTHER PLAYS, WHEN THERE ARE SEVERAL ACTORS ON STAGE? DOES YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE AUDIENCE CHANGE?

BEA: Let me talk about soliloquy in terms of rehearsal and in in terms of performance. It really is much easier to work in a play with other people and a director. Even though you may be secretly directing yourself, and making your choices, you still have something to go to each day. When I work alone, it's very difficult, and I have to teach myself to direct myself. I'm calm about it now, but at first it was tremendously difficult. Now I work, I should imagine, more like a writer does, or a painter facing a canvas: I allow my thoughts to come to me, rather than laying them on myself, as I was used to having thoughts laid on me when I worked ensemble. So, that's the difference there. At first there was a bit of tightness and a bit of discomfort, not knowing how to be the two people; and then after awhile knowing just to let it come, and then just to do it. Because, so far as the doing is concerned, knock on wood I'm well trained now, and I can do what occurs to me. It's just hoping that the right things will occur.

Then in performance, sometimes it is also very difficult. Molly is an hour and fifteen minutes. Short Circuits, the piece I just did last February, is fifty-five minutes in the second half. It's only me, talking: me, talking. There are times when I'm in the middle of it and I think, Oh my God, what am I doing? because there are just certain days when it seems so much more trying, and I have no one to help me, and no one to give me respite. I have to stay out there. But as the piece is done and done again, just as an athlete trains for endurance, so you train endurance into you. By the time you must endure, you can. And, once again, if I don't get in the way of it, if I don't interfere with it, my mouth can handle all the words.

INTERVIEWER: IT SOUNDS ALMOST AS IF YOU SPLIT INTO TWO PEOPLE WHEN YOU PERFORM.

BEA: Yes. Well, no. When I first began, I split into two

people, actually even using the method of writing directions to myself. After I would do something, then I'd sit down and write the directions, if it worked. But that really doesn't work as well as staying one person, knowing that if I keep quiet enough, the idea will come to me. And I don't really start until I have a few ideas. For example, I didn't start Short Circuits, which was a big production, until I had a few key ideas. Then I would try them out on different people. I'd call my son up in Milwaukee and say, "Dickie, what do you think of this idea?" And he'd say, "Mama, that's funny!" And I'd say, "Do you really think so? Wow." A few more of those and then I felt that I really had the piece. So you see, I do sort of need my friends, my trusted and beloved friends. I really do need to ask my son, "Do you like this idea, Dick?" Or I need Jo Harris to say whatever she is going to say. Here and there I wait, and listen. And I feel good or bad depending upon how it sounded when I told it to them.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT ABOUT MOLLY BLOOM, SPECIFICALLY. HOW DID IT COME ABOUT?

BEA: Molly was the second solo piece, after Crazy Jane. One day my friend Josephine Harris, who was teaching a course on James Joyce at Cal Arts at the time, said to me: "I woke up in the night, and realized you were going to read Molly Bloom as part of the Joyce program." When I looked it over, I thought, oh, but you can't read this. This is a whole, complete acting production. But I put aside a project I was working on, and gave myself over to it completely. It took me a summer to edit it. At first it seemed crazy and hopeless, but finally, by knowing it very well, I was able to edit it into five strands of Molly's thought. And I think scholars accept what I've done and think it's good.

INTERVIEWER: THE FIVE STRANDS BEING THE FIVE PEOPLE INVOLVED IN MOLLY'S LIFE, ABOUT WHOM SHE IS THINKING.

BEA: That's right. I have Blazes, Leopold, Stephen, Rudy, and her daughter. That takes care of most everything. It winds itself nicely, and I get all the important points, I think.

(A friend has suggested Beatrice do the whole thing someday. She laughs, and thinks "Well, it's an idea, isn't it?")

BEA: At first, I was overwhelmed by it. But I kept reading it and reading it and reading it, until I got to the point that I almost remembered where on the page certain things occurred. Josephine wrote a letter to a mutual friend, Janet Lewis Winters, about that time, and she sent me a copy. In that letter she referred to "the figure in the carpet" Henry James talked about. Truly, out of the many-figured carpet, you do after awhile begin to see the essential figure emerging.

INTERVIEWER: WAS THERE ANY ONE PARTICULAR THING THAT ATTRACTED YOU INITIALLY TO THE PIECE? WAS IT MOLLY, WAS IT JOYCE'S WAY WITH WORDS, OR WAS IT THE THOUGHTS EXPRESSED BY MOLLY?

BEA: As I began to work on Molly, I really began to love her very much. One, because essentially I think she's fair. She's very straight; she gripes and bitches and complains. But if you really watch it carefully, you'll see that after every time she is angry, put out, or annoyed with someone, you will always hear one sentence where Molly, how shall I say it, vindicates that other person, accepts the other person's behavior. She complains about the cleaning woman sneezing and farting under the pots, and that she has to tell her everything, but oh, well, you know, she's old, she can't help it. And the way I do it, I don't play her sentimentally, and I don't play her as if I love her. I complain bitterly about the cleaning woman. Or, she will complain bitterly and really hurtfully about Blaizes Boylan, Hugh Boylan; about men all over-- they want what they want, they take it, and then they're all through with you-- but she says, oh well, I suppose it's alright for him; after all, he may as well pass the time of day. When her daughter--who has been quite cruel to Molly, as an adolescent is sometimes-- doesn't kiss her mother good-bye as she goes away, Molly is quite hurt. But she says: you have to tell her that she can't put her hair up too early, or put powder on her nose. Well, she's young, she's restless, and knows she's pretty: I was that way myself. So you can see there is always, without being sentimental about it, that moment of forgiveness of all human beings.

INTERVIEWER: WHICH LEADS UP TO THE FINAL ACCEPTANCE, OR AFFIRMATION.

BEA: Affirmation: yes! It really is all there, in that chapter. And I read somewhere, too, that Joyce thinks that's his best chapter, and I do, too. I've read through the book, and had many close, lengthy discussions with Josephine about it, just as I did with the Crazy Jane poems; and I really think, for me certainly, it is the chapter. I don't know what the scholars say, and who am I? But for me, so much of the book is self-conscious, and the last chapter is pure and flowing and very gay. It is almost all-encompassing, in another way.

INTERVIEWER: IN A WAY, THE WHOLE BOOK SEEMS TO WORK UP TO THAT FINAL SOLILOQUY, GIVEN ALL THE SMALLER, MICRO-SOLILOQUIES OF ALL THE CHARACTERS THROUGHOUT THE BOOK.

BEA: Yes, that's exactly right.

INTERVIEWER: BUT WHY DO YOU SUPPOSE IT IS THAT THE SOLILOQUY SPEAKS TO SO MANY PEOPLE? THE BLOOMS ARE JEWISH, BUT REALLY IT IS A VERY IRISH WORK, AS ARE THE YEATS POEMS.

BEA: Oh, how shall I say this? Molly's responses are...from inside of herself, from within her own body; she responds from within her own mind. I don't know about young people, frankly, but I will talk about people of my generation. I am in that fine line between the Victorian world and the modern world. I realized that when I went to see the movie "Blow-Up." I went there with my son, who was about twenty-seven at the time, and I saw the sexual behavior of two girls in it. I remember these teenage girls making it with the young photographer, and I realized, and said to my son afterwards, that I am not of that world. That is not mine. My world is a Victorian world. I just happen to be in on this other world, but I look at it with eyes that are uncomprehending.

INTERVIEWER: IS THE WORLD YOU'RE IN MORE LIKE JOYCE'S WORLD, PERHAPS?

BEA: Yes, exactly, it is closer to Joyce's. I was brought up where we had a housekeeper, and the housekeeper was Molly's age, and Molly's generation, and my mother was Molly's age and generation. That was their time: 1890, or 1908, or whatever.* So I am able to understand Molly because I understood

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Ulysses relates the events of a day in 1904. It was published in 1914.

my mother and the maids we used to have, and the way these women thought about things. But it is not always my way. You see, I have more of a veneer. I'm not saying I'm more sophisticated than Molly, because I'm not. I'm less sophisticated. But I had more of a veneer of sophistication, so I know that certain things Molly says, I would not even have thought. I can't speak for younger girls. I don't know whether they understand it or not. Maybe it's the way I perform it that makes them understand and connect up to it in some way. I'm not about to say it's universal, because I don't know.

INTERVIEWER: CRITICS HAVE SAID THAT JOYCE CONSIDERED MOLLY THE UNIVERSAL, FEMININE FIGURE, A PENELOPE FIGURE. I DON'T KNOW IF THEY ACQUIRED THAT KNOWLEDGE FROM JOYCE OR NOT.

BEA: Yes, well, I think I read somewhere that Joyce's wife was asked, "What do you think of Molly?" And she said, "Oh, he [Joyce] doesn't know anything about women." I can well understand a wife's saying that about her husband. I would quite agree, as a wife. But as an actress handling Molly, I would say he knew...everything about Molly. Everything that I do in Molly is absolutely true, and I am very sensitive to something being not quite right, or being manufactured or artificial. But with this Joyce, it's not so. It is all absolutely true. I'm not saying her stream-of-consciousness is absolutely true. It isn't. It's beautifully manipulated, exquisitely manipulated! And I love it, and it made it easy for me. But the woman, what she says, and how she thinks, and how she responds to the things happening around her, these are very true.

Molly is for me a lower-middle class woman, or middle-middle class. She has all the kind of vulgarity I remember from my childhood, that I had myself. I'm not sentimental the way Molly is; I don't dream of a young poet falling in love with me and getting our pictures in the Sunday tabloids. I'm not sure what a young girl today would feel about Molly. Perhaps the humor-- perhaps it is the way the humorous line comes into the production that wins her over to us. I don't know.

INTERVIEWER: IN OTHER PARTS OF THE BOOK, I KNOW I HAVE BEEN STRUCK BY HOW CONTEMPORARY IT SEEMS, MANY TIMES. MAYBE IT'S TRUE THAT INSIDE OUR MINDS WE REALLY DON'T CHANGE MUCH FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION.

BEA: Well, now that may very well be. And maybe you, of another generation, of my daughter's generation, are closer to the Victorian mother; since I am pretty much in that Victorian world, you are more or less the daughter of a Victorian, and maybe that's why you still understand it. But I'm curious about other girls. Suppose those two girls in Antonioni's movie were real; the two who had pantyhose on, and just a dress over them, and who went in and fought to lay with that fellow. Would they? They would have known some of the vulgarity; but those girls were mindless, faceless girls. They weren't even girls, they were bodies. That was a very frightening movie for me. Would they understand it? Are there still girls like that, or are the sixties over?

INTERVIEWER: I GUESS WE'LL FIND OUT ON THE FIFTEENTH OF MAY, WON'T WE? RETURNING TO PERFORMANCES IN GENERAL, THOUGH: IN YOUR TOTAL REPERTOIRE, ARE THERE SOME AMONG THEM WHICH ARE YOUR FAVORITES?

BEA: I only have four performances that I do so far, alone. They are the Crazy Jane, the Molly, Celeste, and the Short Circuits of Cortázar, who incidentally is the guy who wrote "Blow-Up." I guess I like everything. Those are my only soliloquies. Of other roles I've played, I'd like to do Mother Courage again.

INTERVIEWER: YOU WERE IN THE FIRST AMERICAN PRODUCTION OF BRECHT'S MOTHER COURAGE, WERE YOU NOT?

BEA: Yes, I was. And I did a good job, an adequate job. People found it interesting. But it was very, very difficult; it was so difficult! It was almost un-do-able. Now it would not be hard to do. I really understand it, and once again, how I split in half with the Crazy Jane piece when I first did it, now I think I would not have to do that with Mother Courage, and it would work. I would love to do that; I love to get second chances. I was fortunate enough to get a second chance

at doing Winnie in Happy Days. The first time around it was really okay. The second time around, it was really good! Five or six years go by, and you have a chance to dwell, to deepen, or understand a lot that you didn't understand before. I remember losing a tooth between the first Happy Days and the second, and then I knew what it was to feel that you're losing your teeth and you're losing your eyesight. I didn't know that before. You see, even things like that come into your doing a role! The same thing happened with another, very good role of mine, with Madame Ranevski in "The Cherry Orchard." When I first did it, I was quite young, at Stanford. I think I was about twenty-seven. And it was lovely: people loved it and remembered it. It was very romantic. After that, I had a girl baby, so I knew what it was like to have a little daughter, a little Anya of my own. And I saw an orchard for the first time in my life. Again, when I went to the role some five or six years later, it was with such a deepening, such a maturity. It was an entirely different role.

INTERVIEWER: THE TONE CHANGES, I SUPPOSE, DOESN'T IT?

BEA: There is an utterly different tone, and a very true one. Really, I have done well when I've gone back, the second time around.

INTERVIEWER: ARE YOU WORKING ON ANY NEW SOLILOQUY MATERIAL FOR THE FUTURE?

BEA: That's a great problem for me. Either I'm not well-organized, or I'm working too hard at my daily job. I'm beginning now to think I've got to wait until the summer comes before I can begin to work. I have many ideas; things pop into my head all the time. But so far, I haven't gotten to work, and I've stopped complaining outloud, because I was driving my friends crazy. I'm just very calmly and confidently assuming I will get to work on it as soon as I stop teaching.

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU COMPARE THE ARTISTIC REWARDS YOU GET FROM ONE KIND OF THEATRE AS OPPOSED TO ANOTHER?

BEA: Or from film work, we really should say, because I've been doing films more than plays lately. I don't do enough films to

be bored by them, so it involves a technique I still find challenging. And I'm beginning to get the hang of it now, of working on a film, and of a special quality of calmness you need: a serene face, a calm mien, doing what you have to do. Sometimes the animation we have for the theatre is a little too busy, I think, for the screen. Or for me, it shows up too much on the screen.

INTERVIEWER: THERE MUST BE A LITTLE MORE COMPRESSION FOR FILM.

BEA: Let me say this. I take everything back that I just said. I think that discomfort, being ill-at-ease in a role, in front of a camera and on the stage, is the same. If you're ill-at-ease, you're ill-at-ease, and you're going to over-do it. Either you're going to smile too hard, or tense your shoulders, or tighten your tongue. You're going to do something that displays that. It's no different, and you're just as lousy on film as you are on a stage. But this is the difference: onstage, as I'm rehearsing, wherever I am uncomfortable in a role I can go home and think about it, and release myself from that discomfort through thought. I can try it another way, find out the clue, then go back and do it right. I don't have that chance in film. Economics are such that they film you right then and there, and you don't have much of a chance to ever do it again, to try it out, or to go home and just think about it for awhile and come back the next day. It has to happen there, at that moment. Maybe if you're in a big, million-zillion dollar movie, you can re-do something. I don't know. Or you might have time to rehearse it. But for the most part, you don't. And that's the difference: that now I'm trying to teach myself to get it right the first time when I do it on film, so there won't be any regrets to take home with me.

INTERVIEWER: SO, FILMS ARE STILL A FAIRLY GREAT CHALLENGE FOR YOU.

BEA: Sure. Some of the actors I know, who work a lot in films, are bored by it. They want to get back to the stage. But I still find that challenge interesting, because I haven't quite licked it yet. Once I lick the technique of it, I'm going to

look at those lines they give you to say, and I'm going to think, oy-yoy-yoy! But it's true that, as I know for myself, and what I tell other people, it's the quality of the material that really shapes your life. Working with interesting, beautiful, superb material gives me a very beautiful life. Working with ordinary, even sub-standard ideas, or the expression of those ideas, as one often has to do in some situation comedies, would narrow, would just pull the mind away from any stimulus, any excitation. And it diminishes your life. That I think is very serious.

Really, your life is your work, and your work and your life are one together. It's very important that you feed that life with interesting, superb thoughts; if not your own, then somebody else's.

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And that is the best reason I can think of for going to see Molly on May fifteenth.

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